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A ROMAN INSCRIBED SILVER RING WITH GREEK OWNERSHIP INSCRIPTION

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The purpose of this note is to make known a fragmentary inscribed silver ring. The object (figs. 1–2), which was acquired on the UK antiquities market and is now in a private collection in Spain,¹ presently consists of only the bezel, the hoop having broken off. This bezel, in the form of a shallow lens with roughly circular base, is engraved directly on the convex face (intaglio) with two lines of text in Greek above a floral motif. Possibly the bezel was torn from the metal hoop to which it was once welded, as seen from the unpolished back. A notch on the right of the face may be due to the tooth of a pair of pliers used in the tearing. The letters are in low relief, executed after the flan metal solidified. The text may be read as a personal name:

ΣΩΦΡ
ONIO[.]

Context demands that P was intended for the last letter of the first line, but the bow is indistinct, due either to wear or to a graphic confusion by the engraver with I. The text is surely to be completed as either the nominative, Σωφρόνιο[ς], or the genitive, Σωφρόνιο[υ], of a common Greek name. The floral element is probably to be identified as a palm frond. This motif is attested on its own on rings from sites across Europe and the Near East: parallels include some rings of the Roman Imperial period now in the British Museum, from Antarados, Cyprus, Crete, and Britain.² The palm frond is also common in coinage of the fourth century CE.³



Figures 1 and 2. Silver ring with Greek ownership inscription (diameter 1 cm; 0.80 g)

Inscribed jewelry is difficult to date by letterforms, which tend to be more than usually conservative, while the absence of the band removes a key datum for stylistic dating. The present text, with a generally lunate style and pronounced serifs, may be assigned to the mid or later Roman Imperial period, perhaps the second or third century CE, which is consistent with the floral motif already discussed.⁴

¹ We thank the current owner (Andrés Sánchez Albarrán) for permission to publish the object; it was previously offered for sale by a London-based dealer (eBay auctions, 12/03/2016, seller RomaBritanicus); cf. also <http://www.imperio-numismatico.com/t130582-entalle-de-anillo-de-plata-leyenda-en-griego> (25/02/2019). We are also grateful to Werner Eck, Helmut Engelmann, and Georg Petzl for suggestions on the edition.

² Respectively, F. H. Marshall, *Catalogue of the Finger Rings, Greek, Etruscan, and Roman, in the Departments of Antiquities, British Museum* (London 1907) 28 nos. 161, 166; *ibid.* nos. 162–163; *ibid.* no. 164; *ibid.* no. 165.

³ See R. A. G. Carson, P. V. Hill and J. P. C. Kent, *Late Roman Bronze Coinage* (New York 1989) 16, 36, 45, 65 and 87.

⁴ For the Roman period in general, see F. Henkel, *Die römischen Fingerringe des Rheinlandes und der benachbarten Gebiete* (Berlin 1913).

The ring belongs to a group for which a personal name, generally considered as that of an owner, is the sole, or main, iconographic element.⁵ The direction of writing is the natural one, which would complicate if not preclude use as a seal.⁶ The chief purpose, then, will have been a display of Greek literacy in the context of the well-known Roman epigraphic habit. The owner was of course wealthy enough to afford a silver ring, but the lack of further ornamentation such as an inset gem points away from high luxury. The name is widespread enough to dissuade attempts to identify or localize its bearer,⁷ who will at least have been a native of a Hellenophone part of the East or a westerner interested in showing off Greek erudition. A ring with an inscribed wish for good fortune for a homonym comes from Phoenician Antarados.⁸ There are no explicit indications of Christianity, although the palm, the use of Greek, and the name, borne e.g. by a later patriarch of Jerusalem (*DCB* s.v. 12),⁹ could all be reconciled with such a context.

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⁵ See in general Marshall, *Catalogue*, xxviii–xxix; Henkel, *Fingerringe*, 1:321–322; and recently S. Amoraï-Stark and M. HersHKovitz, *Ancient Gems, Finger Rings and Seal Boxes from Caesarea Maritima: The Hendler Collection* (Zichron Yaakov 2016) 139; for texts, e.g. *SEG* LIV 1794 (54) [add Gorny & Mosch Auktion 223. *Schmuck Antike bis Neuzeit*, 26. Juni 2014 (Gießen 2014) 32 no. 1062]; LVI 2054 (17); LX 1887 (1); LXI 1572 (1).

⁶ For Greek inscriptions from the Roman period in reverse writing giving an owner's name on the bezel, which might therefore have been used as a seal, see e.g. Marshall, *Catalogue*, 31 no. 188; 100 no. 578.

⁷ A search of the online *LGPN* (vols. I–Vb) yields nine results dating from the Classical through the Byzantine periods and spanning the Aegean Islands, Athens and mainland Greece, and Asia Minor; vol. Vc adds six more. For Egypt see the Trismegistos People database (no. 5908).

⁸ A. de Ridder, *Collection de Clercq: Catalogue méthodique et raisonné* 7 (Paris 1911) 394–395 no. 2094.

⁹ Cf. also e.g. L. Pietri and M. Heijmans (edd.), *Prosopographie Chrétienne du Bas-Empire, IV: Prosopographie de la Gaule Chrétienne (314–614)* (Rome 2013) 1824–1825 s.v. Sofronius.